

## 7. Reaction: The Demise of the Second Reconstruction, 1976–1982

Without a new vision of ourselves and the world beyond the borders of our persons, many of the events of the 1970s became nothing more than frustrating repetitions of history, new signs of white racism or mystifying novelties and epiphenomena. . . . What kind of a society do we want, and are we willing to struggle for? Without a nationwide pressing of that question among blacks and whites, we surely would not recognize 'integration' if we saw it.

Vincent Harding

Starvation is God's way of punishing those who have too little faith in capitalism.

John D. Rockefeller, Sr.

### I

Nothing fails like success. By the mid-1970s, the black nationalist impulse had been effectively splintered, repressed, and removed from political discourse. The black élite was retrieved from its marginal and defensive stance within the black community, and with the election of Carter, had unprecedented access to middle-to-upper levels of the political bureaucracy. The BEOs, like the Old Guard of the NAACP and Urban League, viewed the 1976 election as a kind of public ratification for the body of its own politics. Radicalism and militancy were defeated. Wallace, Maddox and the most overtly

racist white Southern governors and representatives either had been removed from public offices or, at least, no longer postured defiantly against desegregation. Jim Crow signs had been removed from public restaurants; federally-sponsored 'affirmative action' programmes brought tens of thousands of blacks into middle-class jobs in both the public and private sectors; blacks were allowed to participate without restrictions within the political marketplace; urban riots had been quelled, and ghetto blacks seemingly succumbed to the quiescence of the dominant society. The general interpretation of the period was, at least for the black élite, one of tremendous optimism. There was no longer a need to march in the streets against the policies of big-city mayors, because blacks were now in virtually every municipal administration across the nation. The total number of blacks in the Congressional Black Caucus had doubled in the eight years before Carter's victory; there was every reason to believe that their numbers would double again in another decade, as more Congressional districts became primarily non-white. Certainly, it was said, the Second Reconstruction was on the verge of success. Black freedom would become a reality through gradual yet meaningful reforms within the existing system.

The prime beneficiary of the gains from the Second Reconstruction was the black élite. It is imperative here to describe in some detail the socio-economic position of this stratum, in order to explain its basically optimistic and reformist outlook. First, and foremost, the black élite was characterised by its relatively modest size. Only about 50,000 black men and 200,000 black women were employed as elementary and secondary schoolteachers in 1977. In that same year, the numbers of black medical and health-care workers were approximately 50,000 men and 116,000 women; professional and technical white-collar workers, 315,000 males and 505,000 women, respectively; and salaried managers and administrators, 180,000 males and 78,000 females, respectively. When contrasted with whites, however, the actual presence of blacks in white-collar jobs was actually quite low when compared to their numbers in the overall labour force. In 1977 again, the actual percentage of blacks to all races within the medical and health-care professions was 3.9 per cent for all men and 8.4 per cent among all women. Among all salaried administrators and managers, only 3.0 per cent of the men were black, and 5.0 per cent of the women employees were black. The figures decline still further when each white-collar category is analysed by specific vocation.



Over 90 per cent of all black women employed in health care were nurses or more commonly para-medics and hospital workers. As late as 1970, the number of black doctors in the US was only 6106, about 2 per cent of the total number of all physicians and surgeons. In the mid-1970s, there were fewer than 5000 practising black attorneys in the US, about 1 per cent of all lawyers.

This élite was in many respects, however, markedly similar in its socio-economic profile with other upwardly mobile white ethnic groups which had advanced in previous decades. Many of these men and women had attended the newly desegregated colleges and universities during the 1960s and 1970s. The Federal government's requirements for affirmative action forced the admission of large numbers of blacks into positions which they had long been denied, solely on the basis of race. Thus, in the early 1970s, the upper fraction of the black labour force experienced a real advance in its absolute incomes. Between 1969 and 1974, for example, the earnings of the top 5 per cent of all non-white families increased from \$17,238 to \$24,267, about 74 per cent of the level for that of white families of similar background. By 1977, 21 per cent of all black families had incomes between \$15,000 and \$24,999, and another 9 per cent earned above \$25,000. Advances in income were more likely for those black families whose major 'breadwinner' had a college education. The median income of black family heads 25-years-old and over who had acquired one to three years of college training was \$13,371 in 1974 and \$15,027 in 1976. For black family heads who had graduated from college, median earnings jumped from \$17,316 in 1974 to \$20,733 in 1976. For one special group, black husband-wife families below the age of 35 who were both income earners, the income gap between themselves and other white families with a similar socio-cultural profile virtually disappeared. In the South, black husband-wife families in this group earned \$14,563 in 1976, roughly 90 per cent of the earnings received by white families with the same background. In the North and West, the incomes of young black husband-wife families actually exceeded that of white families, \$16,715 to \$16,691, in 1976. The traditional income margin of racial inequality, at least for many of the black élite, had been almost eliminated by the mid-1970s.

In other economic aspects, the status of the black élite was remarkably secure. In 1977, for instance, the overall black unemployment rate for civilian workers was 13.1 per cent for men, 14.8 per cent for women. Black professional and technical workers, however,

experienced unemployment rates of 6.1 per cent for males, 5.1 per cent for females. Black salaried and self-employed managers and administrators had jobless rates of only 5.3 per cent and 5.6 per cent for males and females respectively. Conversely, in 1977 black males employed as service workers had an unemployment rate of 13.7 per cent; black female blue-collar workers experienced a jobless rate of 16.9 per cent; and 16.4 per cent of all black men who worked as non-farm labourers were without jobs. In the fields of commerce and finance, black entrepreneurs were also registering notable gains. Between 1969 and 1977, the total number of black businesses increased from 163,073 to 231,195; gross receipts of these firms almost doubled, from \$4.5 billion to \$8.7 billion. Between 1970 and 1975, 24 black-owned banks were founded, compared to only 11 established between 1960 and 1969. Yet even here, the fragility of the economic foundations of the black élite were clearly visible to any researcher. Blacks owned few if any corporations or industries which were most profitable. Fewer than 2 per cent of all US construction firms and manufacturing industries were black-owned. Blacks acquired only a half of 1 per cent of all wholesale trade firms, financial establishments, insurance companies, and real estate firms. Over 80 per cent of all black-owned firms in 1980 did not have a single paid employee, and over one-third of all black-owned establishments failed within twelve months after beginning business. In 1977, only 113 black-owned businesses out of 231,195 had more than 100 paid employees, and another 230 retained only 50 to 99 workers. The upper 0.005 per cent of all black firms hired most of the employees and earned 28.5 per cent of all black businesses' gross receipts.

Considered as a socio-economic group, the black élite – in the fields of banking, commerce, law, education, and medicine – comprised only 7 to 10 per cent of the total Afro-American population. They were set apart from the vast majority of working-class and impoverished blacks by their relative income parity with whites; their educational training and professional advancement; their political moderation and social conformity; their advocacy of the economics of capitalism and corporate upward mobility. In all critical respects, this group had every reason to applaud the gains of the previous years, the destruction of Jim Crow, and the acceptance of affirmative action within the white-collar workforce. This stratum controlled the NAACP, and the Urban League, as well as other civil rights organisations. It owned or influenced the 50 black-owned radio and

television stations which reached into the predominantly black metropolitan areas; it had access to white politicians, corporate leaders and influential social institutions; its own leaders were appointed to President Carter's Administration in a variety of capacities. The rise and institutionalisation of the black élite during the 1970s had a profound impact upon white and black societies. For whites of all income levels, the emergence of thousands of well-educated, articulate and aggressive black professionals seemed to require a political 'white backlash'. Whites assumed incorrectly that the great majority of black Americans were now firmly within the 'middle class'. In growing numbers, whites asked bitterly: 'Why are blacks still demanding civil rights? Segregation has ended, and with affirmative action, partially-qualified blacks are now taking jobs which rightfully belong to better-qualified whites.' Conveniently ignoring economic data on the burgeoning millions of black unemployed and the poor, many white liberals and civil rights proponents began to insist that 'too much' had been given to all blacks, and that some of the political and economic reforms allotted to non-whites had to be rescinded. On the other side of the colour line, the primary effect of the black élite was a growing socio-economic and cultural division among blacks. Thousands of black professionals fled the inner cities to purchase homes in formerly all-white suburbs. Black middle-class adults who had once attended segregated black public schools and universities now sent their children to private schools and white, upper-class colleges. Many black doctors and attorneys who only a few years before were confined to the ghetto now serviced a more affluent clientele which was largely white or primarily black élite. Desegregation allowed the most gifted black intellectuals, athletes, artists and musicians to leave black colleges to accept higher-paying positions within white institutions. Thus in a cruel paradox of history, many traditional black cultural, economic, social and political institutions experienced a decline in status, quality and viability precisely because Jim Crow had been overturned. The objective social distance between upwardly mobile black professionals and the great majority of black labourers and the poor had never been greater.

## II

While the black élite advanced, the social and economic conditions for the majority of blacks remained the same, and in some respects

grew worse. Millions of blacks in the South and North lived in dilapidated, rat-infested dwellings. In 1970, 61 per cent of all black families living in rural areas and 8 per cent of black urban households lacked some or all plumbing facilities, compared to only 11 per cent for rural whites and 2 per cent of urban whites; 902,000 black families residing in the South lived in housing units which had either no toilets or incomplete plumbing facilities. Many black families lived in overcrowded apartments or rented houses in which their landlords, who usually were white, denied them adequate heat and other essentials. In urban renter-occupied dwellings, one-fifth of all black homes had a person-per-room ratio above 1.01 persons per room in 1970 – a clear indication of overcrowded conditions. In rural areas and in the South, housing conditions were worse: 29 per cent of all Southern black renters and 19 per cent of Southern black homeowners lived in crowded housing. Among rural blacks who rented their dwellings, overcrowded conditions affected 40 per cent of all families. Almost one-fourth of all rural black renters had an incredible person-per-room ratio above 1.5 persons per room. Given these dire living conditions, it is not surprising that a disproportionately high number of blacks suffer from certain types of illnesses compared to whites. US Census statistics for 1974 revealed that blacks suffered much higher death rates than whites per 100,000 population in many categories: for tuberculosis, blacks had an annual death rate of 4.1 to the white death rate of 1.3; syphilis, 0.5 for blacks, 0.1 for whites; hypertension, 5.3 for blacks, 1.3 for whites; early infancy diseases, 29 for blacks, 11.3 for whites. Overall, by race and gender, blacks' life expectancies from birth were lower than those for whites. Using 1974 statistics, black males' life expectancy was 62.9 years; white males, 68.9 years; black females, 71.2 years; white females, 76.6 years. Black womens' mortality rates during childbirth were 600 per cent higher than among white women in 1970. Out of every thousand, 16.8 black newborn infants died before reaching their first month, compared to only 10.4 white infants in 1975.

The most disturbing social characteristic within black America in the post-segregation period was the upward spiral in the rate of homicide. Trapped in the urban ghettos of America's decaying inner cities, plagued with higher unemployment rates, disease, bad housing, poor public schools, and inadequate social services, young blacks were filled with a sense of anger, self-hatred, and bitterness. In the 1960s, this black rage lashed out against the symbols of white

property, power and privilege. Black Power provided unemployed black youth with an opportunity to vent their collective anger into a political act of defiance. In the wake of the demise of militant black nationalism, and with the flight of the black élite into the safe havens of suburbia, the ghetto's black rage was unleashed against itself. In 1960, the homicide rate per 100,000 blacks was 21.9, slightly less than the black homicide figure of 1910 (22.3). By 1970, the black homicide rate reached 35.5 per cent, compared to a 4.4 figure among American whites. During the Nixon, Ford and Carter Administrations, black fratricidal violence soared. About 55 black males per thousand were the victims of violent crime during the 1970s. Of all black working-class and impoverished households 13 to 16 per cent experienced robberies every year in the decade. Black male homicide rates were between 600 and 900 per cent higher than those for whites by the late 1970s. And by 1980, 50 per cent of all American homicides were black males killing other black males. The rise in urban violent crime allowed white politicians and corporate interests to increase the number of police and law enforcement officers within the black community. US per capita police expenditures jumped 39 per cent between 1970 and 1977. Federal government and local government expenditures for police in 1977 reached \$1.4 billion and \$8.8 billion, respectively. Despite sizeable increases in police spending, white Americans of all classes became terrified of the omnipresent spectre of the 'black criminal, rapist and burglar'. By 1978, nine out of ten US citizens were convinced that the courts were not attacking crime vigorously enough, and almost half were afraid to walk in their own neighbourhoods. As a result, the urban centres of the nation were rapidly becoming permanently armed camps.

The social consequences of crime and fear were soon manifested in a more authoritarian treatment for blacks within the US criminal justice system. By the late 1970s, over two million black Americans, a figure equalling 8 per cent of the total black population, were arrested every year. Despite vast amounts of money spent to halt crime, almost nothing was done to improve the physical conditions of jails and prisons, or to initiate rehabilitation programmes for persons convicted of crimes. In the state of Illinois, to cite one example, over \$160 million was appropriated to the Illinois Department of Corrections in fiscal 1979. Of that sum, only \$9000 was spent on improving the facilities in the state's prisons. Many states abandoned 'indeterminate sentencing' in favour of 'mandatory sentences' for specific

crimes. American critics of the prison system noted that ‘the trend is currently toward warehousing and punishment rather than toward rehabilitation, which is the professed goal of state prisons’.<sup>1</sup> States passed ‘habitual offender laws’, which ordered the life imprisonment of any person who had been sentenced a second time for certain crimes, including murder, treason, or ‘deviate sexual assault’. To intimidate would-be felons, a few state governments experimented with novel methods. In May 1982, the state legislature of Georgia ordered the creation of a ‘mobile death wagon’. Georgia’s electric chair was literally placed on wheels, as it were, ‘so condemned criminals can be executed near the scene’ of their alleged crimes.<sup>2</sup> The political demand for law-and-order culminated in a growing web of coercion and terror for blacks, Latinos and low-income whites as well. By December 1981, two million American adults were behind bars, on probation or on parole – about one out of every 83 persons over the age of 18 in the country – 369,000 adults were confined in state and federal prisons; 157,000 were in local jails; over 1.2 million were on probation, and another 224,000 were paroled. About a half of the penal population, at any given time, was black. By June 1982, 1038 persons were awaiting execution, the highest number in American history. Almost half of this group were Afro-Americans. While only 13 of the prisoners on ‘Death Row’ had black victims, 54 per cent of all US homicide victims in the 1980s were black.

As the social environment continued to deteriorate, many black families began to splinter under the forces of oppression. The number of children born to unmarried black women increased significantly. In 1950, only 88,000 births among non-whites were outside wedlock. In 1975, the figure for blacks reached 250,000, 48.8 per cent of all black births recorded that year. Birth rates, which had declined among blacks between 1900–60, began to increase, especially among the uneducated and the poor. For black married women with an eighth grade education or less, the average number of children increased from 3.6 in 1960 to 4.8 in 1975. Of all black married women between the ages from 35 to 39 years in 1975, 36 per cent had five or more children, and another 46 per cent had two to four children. As birth rates soared, the percentage of black children who lived with both parents dropped. Only 17 per cent of all black children in 1975 lived with both parents in households where the total annual income was below \$4000. That same year, 957,100 black children whose families earned between \$4000 and \$5900 annually lived with only one adult,

while only 391,000 children in the same income group lived with both parents. Even for upper-income levels, the tendency for black children to live with only one adult was much greater among blacks than for whites. Of all children from black families earning above \$15,000, 86 per cent lived in two-parent households, yet for whites of similar incomes, the figure was 97 per cent. Increasingly, some black women were finding it difficult even to find males of marriageable age in certain metropolitan communities. Nationally, the percentage of black women 14-years-old and over who were married declined from 60 per cent in 1960 to 49 per cent in 1975. The number of black women who were divorced doubled in this fifteen-year period; black households maintained by females with no husband present increased from 843,000 in 1960 to 1,940,000 in 1975. Many black women asked each other – ‘Where are the black men?’ The answers are found partially in the statistics above, and in others as well: over 10,000 black men were murdered each year; 260,000 were in federal and state penitentiaries by 1980; thousands died prematurely due to hypertension and other illnesses; several million were among the partially employed or unemployed, who could not financially support a household.

By the late 1970s, American social scientists began to describe the process of degeneration taking place in the black community in several ways. University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson accepted the ‘illusion’ that a majority of blacks had become middle class, or at least would soon become more affluent, in *The Declining Significance of Race*, published in 1978. However, Wilson was forced to acknowledge that there was a growing army of ‘lower class blacks’ who had been virtually unaffected by civil rights legislation, affirmative action, and Federal government initiatives to diminish unemployment. ‘The challenge of economic dislocation in modern industrial society’, Wilson suggested, ‘calls for public policy programs to attack inequality on a broad class front.’<sup>3</sup> More perceptively, Douglas G. Glasgow’s *Black Underclass* described the recent development of a hard-core number of young blacks who had virtually no social or economic prospects for advancement. Unlike previous generations of impoverished blacks, the members of this new social strata ‘were jobless and lacked saleable skills and opportunities to get them; they had been rejected and labeled as social problems by the police, the schools, the employment and welfare agencies; they were victims of the new camouflaged racism’. The urban society had become a social nightmare, where black men ‘drank, gambled, [and] fought’, where

‘hustling, quasi-legitimate schemes, and outright deviant activity are also alternatives to work’.<sup>4</sup> Juvenile youth gangs sprang up in many cities, involving the participation of up to one-third of the black teenagers in some places. Drugs such as cocaine and heroin which had been confined to a relatively small portion of the population became endemic among hundreds of thousands of black youth. ‘Junkies’ – individuals dependent upon illegal drugs – began to be a visible problem in inner city high schools. Some reported instances of junkies were cases as young as 12-years-old. Prostitution and random violence, disease and death became commonplace. Glasgow’s ‘underclass’, or more accurately, the black urban reserve army of labour, was a permanently unemployable strata of society. Several million black adults had never had the opportunity to acquire gainful full-time employment. Now, as the economic prospects of urban centres declined, and as factories and plants began closing and moving to the American Southwest and overseas, these black women, men and youngsters were faced with the prospect that they would never work during their entire lives. City services, slipping in the 1960s, sharply diminished in the 1970s. Uncollected garbage, sewage in open streets, rats and cockroaches, dilapidated apartments, buildings gutted by fire, police brutality, reductions in health care and welfare services – these were only part of the social foundations and physical environment of the black underclass.

### III

In the mid-1970s, Vincent Harding notes, ‘everything seemed to change, the organic center fell apart’.<sup>5</sup> In this environment of black upper-class success and black working-class poverty and repression, many blacks turned in large numbers to religion. With the overt suppression of revolutionary black nationalist groups, the Nation of Islam was in a position to recapture some of its former power. Most black radicals, influenced heavily by Malcolm X’s public separation from and feud with the Nation in 1964–65, still viewed the organisation with a great deal of scepticism. But Elijah Muhammad, the octogenarian who still reigned with an iron hand, was able to regain a degree of allegiance among new generations of urban black youth who were searching for spiritual and political direction. Simultaneously, Muhammad attempted to establish closer links with the US government and other foreign interests in an effort to resolve his group’s



ongoing political and economic troubles. By making peace with Chicago's political boss, Richard Daley, the Nation was able to eliminate most of the police surveillance and harassment against the sect. Imitating the FBI, Nation of Islam members in Philadelphia destroyed that city's Black Panther Party headquarters in retaliation for the group's public advocacy of Malcolm X's ideas. In 1972, Muhammad negotiated a \$3 million interest-free loan from Colonel Muamar Kadafi which was used to expand Black Muslim enterprises. Despite these gains, the Nation of Islam was still plagued by internal dissension. One of the Nation's most dynamic and powerful ministers, Hamaas Abdul Khaalis (Ernest McGhee) denounced the Nation as a corruption of the true faith, Sunni Islam, in 1972. Khaalis declared that Muhammad was 'a lying deceiver' and stated that their leader 'who inspired former dope addicts and prostitutes to monklike lives of sacrifice, discipline and hard work, was instead stealing his followers' money and leading them to hell'.<sup>6</sup> For devout defenders of Muhammad, Khaalis' challenge could not remain unanswered. On 18 January 1973, at least five armed gunmen, all members of the Nation of Islam, entered Khaalis' Washington, DC, home and butchered five members of his family.

With Muhammad's death in 1975, the leadership of the Nation of Islam passed to one of his sons, Wallace. Quickly and efficiently, Wallace Muhammad 'Malcolmised' the organisation within two years. The para-military formation, the Fruit of Islam, was disbanded; the mixture of racial mythology and religious dogma promulgated by Elijah Muhammad was abandoned in favour of the orthodox teachings of Islam; whites were permitted to attend services and in some instances even joined the group. The Nation was renamed the World Community of al-Islam in the West. In other matters, however, Wallace Muhammad did not abandon the overtures of his father towards Arab nations and the American government. In 1976 he obtained a gift of \$16 million from Sheikh Sultan Ben Mohammad al-Qasimi, head of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, to construct a new educational institution and a mosque. The World Community of al-Islam even succeeded in obtaining government contracts with the US Army to package food and supplies for troops. Yet these dramatic changes did not occur without more dissension. Louis Farrakhan, perhaps the most charismatic minister in the Nation after the departure of Malcolm X, quietly left the Nation by 1978. In February 1981, Farrakhan announced the creation of the

‘old’ Nation of Islam under his direction, following the tenets of Elijah Muhammad. Several thousand blacks soon flocked to Farrakhan’s group, while many others simply withdrew from both versions of Islam, disillusioned and embittered. The decline and disintegration of the Nation represented in Harding’s view the death of a ‘[corrupt] and dictatorial organisation that had essentially separated itself from the day-to-day struggles of our people. It means the loss of a community that most blacks never formally joined, but which seemed to exist – sometimes romantically – on behalf of certain unspoken feelings and desires in millions of hearts and minds.’<sup>7</sup>

Growing numbers of poor and dispossessed blacks turned to evangelical Christianity to find some comfort in their shattered lives. The great majority of itinerant preachers who were outside the old-established churches in the black community were simply harmless rogues, plying their rhetorical craft in exchange for modest financial wealth, consoling the poor and the hopeless with a flair for drama and hokum. Others were more dangerous. One dynamic white preacher in Indianapolis, Indiana, James Jones, developed his ‘People’s Temple’ with a predominantly black constituency. Moving his congregation to Ukiah, California, in the mid-1960s, Jones started a series of self-help institutions, an animal shelter, and a farm. Relocating to the black Fillmore district of San Francisco in 1970, Jones quickly established a popular following. Elderly and poor blacks joined People’s Temple to benefit from the congregation’s impressive array of social services. Almost 2000 people were given free breakfasts and dinners every day at the Temple; young children were educated in the group’s day-care programme; teenagers were attracted to the social activities and the church’s film workshop, printing press and carpentry workshop. Jones recruited social workers and counsellors to assist members in completing forms to receive welfare benefits, and to aid them with other economic problems.

Within several years, Reverend Jones began to orient the church towards specific political struggles. His sermons and public statements became increasingly linked with other progressive organisations, from the radical American Indian Movement to black community activist groups. People’s Temple members were organised into a political machine, registering black and other Third World people, and they mobilised thousands of inner city voters in support of liberal and socialist-leaning Democratic candidates. As a result,

Jones became an influential figure in Northern California politics, and a political ally of two prominent black leaders, California lieutenant governor Mervyn Dymally and state assembly-man Willie Brown of San Francisco. For many white liberals and socialists, 'the Temple was a remarkable institution – a mass political organisation in the form of a revivalist church – and they praised it for bringing many poor blacks to demonstrations and involving them in the daily work of local campaigns'.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of Bay Area residents read Jones' newspaper, the *Peoples Forum*, which claimed a circulation of 600,000. Democratic Party officials and civil rights leaders valued Jones' support, and praised the People's Temple's political activities. Glowing letters of endorsement and support for Jones were written by Wallace Muhammad, San Francisco mayor George Moscone, Roy Wilkins, vice president Walter Mondale and the president's wife, Rosalynn Carter. Jones was appointed to a post in the San Francisco city administration, and was applauded for his members' outstanding and vigorous activities in community services and local politics. Beneath this façade of respectability, however, People's Temple was a veritable haven of fear and corruption: drugs, rape and aberrant sexual behaviour, beatings and psychological torture of members.

In 1976–77 Jones ordered the movement of People's Temple to the South American nation of Guyana. Jones used his massive political credentials, his support from the US vice president and other American dignitaries, to persuade the Guyanese government to allow the settlement to develop. By 1978 People's Temple had established a 3000-acre estate in northwestern Guyana, called 'Jonestown', which was settled by 1000 American citizens. The small town quickly cultivated crops, which were sold to Guyanese, Trinidadian, and Venezuelan markets. To secure his village, Jones and his followers purchased large amounts of arms and military equipment. In this secluded jungle haven, Jones' tendencies towards sexual brutality, paranoia and megalomania were increased tenfold. When an American Congressman investigating rumours of Jones' enterprise visited Jonestown, he and his party were murdered. In desperation, Jones ordered his followers to commit suicide, along with himself and his wife: 912 bodies were recovered in Jonestown by Guyanese authorities; over two-thirds of the victims were Afro-Americans. The tragedy of Jonestown raised many still unresolved questions among US blacks. US medical services personnel performed no autopsies on the corpses; American government officials and politicians who had

once been supporters of Jones offered no explanations or views on the mass suicides; rumours which circulated that Jones held up to \$12 million in foreign banks were ‘suppressed’. One black activist, Jitu Weusi, called on the United Nations to ‘perform an investigation into the imminent possibility’ that Jonestown was a prelude to black ‘genocide. While the act physically occurred in Guyana’, the Brooklyn, New York leader declared, ‘the architect for mass murder was a product of the decadent society of white, capitalist United States of America. . . . The questions and unexplained circumstances of the Jonestown massacre are entirely too numerous for us as a people to simply ignore and file as the actions of a religious fanatic and his misguided flock.’<sup>9</sup> For white progressives, the entire fiasco called into question their ‘particular responsibility’ for aiding an evangelical maniac to brutalise sexually, intimidate, and finally to murder innocent people. The editors of *Socialist Review* declared,

No attempts to blame the Jonestown tragedy on the forces of anomic capitalism or on a paranoid leader who saw himself as the reincarnation of Christ and Lenin, or on the CIA, can free us of the need to explain why the Temple grew and why it was accepted as an ally of progressive movements in a region where the left is as strong as anywhere in the nation. . . . The damage done by Jonestown cannot be repaired; beyond the immediate horrors, it will remain for years a nightmarish vision of socialism as death, as passivity and escapism taken to their limits.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV

From the beginning, Jimmy Carter seemed an unlikely champion of blacks’ rights and political reform. The Georgia peanut farmer was the first candidate to defeat an incumbent president since 1932; he was the first Democrat to be elected from the Deep South since the narrow victory of James K. Polk of Tennessee over Henry Clay in 1844. Carter’s election was due to overwhelming black support, but also to his ability to obfuscate essential public policy issues. His entire campaign rested on three ‘chief slogans: “I will never lie to you,” “The Golden Rule [should] be applied in all public matters,” and “It is now a time for healing” – [which] specifically repudiated the deception, rancor, and divisiveness associated with Watergate’.<sup>11</sup> Repeatedly, Carter identified himself to black supporters with the

racially egalitarian image of Southern Populism which had flourished three generations earlier. Populist historian Lawrence Goodwyn noted, however, that the president's 'paternal forebears were credit merchants who, like their counterparts elsewhere in the South, managed to acquire title to much of the surrounding countryside. As such, from a Populist perspective, they were part of the problem, not part of the solution'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a fuller examination of Carter's own rise to power indicated a close and cordial relationship with corporate interests which had perpetuated world-wide racial oppression and, in earlier years, racial segregation. Carter was a prominent member of the Trilateral Commission, a private organisation of Western European, Japanese and North American financial, corporate and political leaders established in 1973 by the head of the Chase-Manhattan Bank, David Rockefeller. Many of Carter's selections for his administration were drawn from the Trilateral Commission – vice president Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Secretary of the Treasury Michael Blumenthal, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, and Andrew Young. Other Carter appointees came directly from two of the largest multinational corporations in the world, Coca Cola (based in Atlanta, Georgia) and International Business Machines (IBM): Coca Cola attorneys Griffin Bell, Attorney General, and Joseph Califano, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare; IBM board directors Vance, Brown and black attorney Patricia Harris, Secretary of Housing and Development.

For almost five decades, the American political party system, ostensibly characterised by the electoral competition between the Democratic and Republican parties, had actually become marked by three distinct points of view identified by particular social characteristics. They comprised political blocs which cut across orthodox party lines. The first, which comprised about one-quarter to one-third of the US electorate, was 'mass conservatism', which included most of the Republican Party, some conservative Southern Democrats, former segregationists, and most of the corporations and financial interests. In addition, this first bloc included reactionary populist groups which either opposed certain civil rights-type reforms (e.g. court-ordered busing to promote racially integrated public schools) or which advocated legislation to limit the rights of women, homosexuals and political dissidents. The second point of view, 'centrist social liberalism', was slightly less than half of the general electorate. This very broad political bloc included Republican

liberals, Eastern corporate leaders and financial interests, the Cold War Liberals in the Democratic Party (Truman, Kennedy), white ethnic workers, moderate and anti-segregationist Southern Democrats (Carter), most trade union leaders, and the more conservative representatives of civil rights groups. The smallest bloc, the 'democratic left', encompassed one-fifth to one-quarter of the vote. This grouping included almost all black and Hispanic organisations, liberal and leftist labour leaders, feminist groups, environmentalists, socialists, and perhaps one-third of the Democratic Party's leaders.

From 1932 until 1980, every American president had been a part of the great 'centrist social liberalism' tendency.<sup>13</sup> Roosevelt and at times Johnson had been in the left wing of this eclectic grouping; Eisenhower and Nixon were to the right, but neither could accurately be described as 'true conservatives'. On a racial axis, the democratic left was a strong proponent of civil rights, extensive social democratic reforms in welfare, public housing, education and social justice; the conservatives were vigorous proponents of racial inequality; the centrists were to be found unevenly distributed between these two poles. Since blacks were chiefly responsible for electing Carter, there was the clear expectation that the new president would embrace a programme of progressive racial reforms and social democracy. This did not occur. If anything, blacks were dismayed to learn, as the administration developed its agenda, that Carter was probably the most conservative Democratic president since Woodrow Wilson, the arch-segregationist of 1913–21. After a short time in office, corporate leaders drew pleasant parallels between Carter and Roosevelt's immediate conservative predecessor in the White House, Herbert Hoover. One aide to Eisenhower suggested that Carter 'ventured no notions in economic philosophy to which [Hoover] could have taken serious exception'. Patrick Caddell, a Carter pollster and assistant, urged the new president 'to co-opt many of [the Republicans'] issue positions and to take away large chunks of their presidential coalition by the right actions in government'. A move to the political right would 'cause rumblings from the left of the Democratic Party', but these could be safely ignored.<sup>14</sup> Thus, blacks and the broader American democratic left had helped to elect a president who had absolutely no intention of carrying out key elements of their programme. Once he had assumed office, Carter began to rescind many of the basic achievements of the Second Reconstruction.

The first real indication that Carter was actually carrying out a

'Nixon-Republican'-style programme came in May 1977, when administration officials declared that no new social welfare, health care or educational programmes would be initiated. Carter protégé Bert Lance, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, stated that inflation, not unemployment, was the chief economic dilemma confronting Americans. Carter's oft-repeated campaign promise to reduce defence expenditures was promptly abandoned, and the 1978 military budget soared to the highest level in US history up to that point, \$111.8 billion. Despite the appointments of Young, Harris, John Lewis, and Weldon Rougeau to high administrative posts, relatively few blacks received positions in the executive branch of government. In a fifteen-month period between April–June 1976 and July–September 1977, non-white unemployment rates edged upward, from 12.9 per cent to 13.6 per cent, and non-white youth unemployment increased from 35.5 per cent to 39.2 per cent. In Carter's first year in office, an additional 131,000 black families fell below the Federal government's poverty level – yet the White House remained opposed to any extensive initiatives to address the crisis. Black leaders who had campaigned for the Southern Democrat were now ashamed to meet with their own constituents. In August 1977, a number of black leaders who had campaigned for Carter caucused at the national office of the Urban League in New York City. All of the key participants – including Jesse Jackson, Bayard Rustin, Baltimore Congressperson Parren Mitchell, Urban League leader Vernon Jordan, and the newly elected head of the NAACP, Benjamin Hooks of Memphis, Tennessee – claimed that they had been 'betrayed', and that Carter was practising a policy of 'callous neglect' towards blacks.<sup>15</sup>

Carter's relations with blacks deteriorated still further in 1978–79. On economic policy, the president did not battle aggressively for the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1976, more popularly termed the Humphrey–Hawkins bill. Denounced by conservatives as 'socialistic', the proposal was a joint effort of blacks, democratic leftists, labour union leaders, and many Cold War Liberals such as Senator Hubert Humphrey. In its original form, the act stated that 'all adult Americans able and willing to work have the right to equal opportunities for useful paid employment at fair rates of compensation', and declared that the Federal government should 'meet human and national needs' such as day care, public housing, and public transportation. The act called for the creation of a 'Job Guarantee

Office' which was 'responsible for actually enforcing the right of all "able and willing" adults to a job'. Humphrey-Hawkins was accurately described by friends and opponents alike as 'the most significant employment legislation to appear in the United States in thirty years'.<sup>16</sup> The act was passed eventually in a radically diluted form, such that the basic social democratic thrust of its proposed reforms was eliminated. Civil rights proponents were disappointed that the president had not used the full weight of the administration to gain a credible piece of legislation. Even Coretta King, who described the new law as 'an important first step in the struggle for full employment' recognised that 'we did not get all of the provisions in the bill that we would have liked'.<sup>17</sup> Carter's imposed reductions in Federal spending for social programmes, combined with a relaxation in laws on the private sector, led to higher corporate profits at the expense of the working class. In January–March 1979, for example, after-tax profits of 552 major US corporations had risen 37 per cent over the preceding year. In a series of blatant overtures to business interests, Carter urged the US Federal Reserve Board 'to raise interest rates and tighten the credit supply, so as to curtail economic expansion'; increased the US military budget by 10 to 15 per cent 'combined with unprecedented slashes in benefits and services to the population'; pushed Congress to pass 'measures to increase the prices of dairy products, grain, meat, and other products, and to "deregulate" transportation industries, fostering monopolization and unrestricted price increases'; and imposed 'wage/price guidelines, aiming to limit wage and benefit increases to 7 percent, in the face of living cost increases exceeding 10 percent.' Liberal, black, and socialist economists condemned the Carter agenda 'for lowering living standards for much of the population' and 'for wiping out many small property owners'.<sup>18</sup> By January 1979, only 33 per cent of all Democrats stated in a national poll that they wanted Carter to serve as their party's nominee in 1980. Political columnist Ken Bode described the president as having 'consciously [moved] the Democratic party away from nearly a half-century of its own history'.<sup>19</sup>

For black social institutions and local governments controlled by blacks, Carter represented an acceleration of the political reaction imposed by Nixon. Black colleges and universities, for example, had received three-fourths of their institutional support from the Federal government's 'Developing Institutions Program', under Title III of the Civil Rights Act during the Nixon–Ford Administrations. Under



Carter, the level of black institutional support was slashed to 53 per cent in 1977, and was down to 18 per cent in 1980. Promises of financial aid to black college students and administrators were never kept. Black political columnist William Raspberry attacked Carter's Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Joseph Califano, for his callous disregard for 'the historical rose' of black colleges, and for this '[indifference] to the vital service they perform'.<sup>20</sup> The administration's 'comprehensive national urban policy', which was announced in March 1978, allotted only \$1 billion per year to create new public jobs for the ghetto's unemployed, and provided only \$150 million for urban social services. Increasingly, black mayors were unable to reconcile their feeble defence of Carter's austerity budget with the economic demands of black working-class constituents. In 1977, Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson fired 900 mostly black sanitation employees during a strike which was provoked by their lack of a pay increase for over three years. Many of these AFSCME union employees had campaigned extensively for Jackson during his first successful race for mayor in 1973, and were devastated when the black leader swung behind local corporate and anti-working-class interests once he was in office. Detroit mayor Coleman Young, once a leftist and activist in the National Negro Labor Council, formed an active alliance with corporate leader Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company and other executives. Black Detroit residents' city services were reduced; public educational and social programmes were cut; yet corporate property taxes were lowered, to foster a favourable climate for greater business investment. The majority of black mayors were forced to discipline the black public labour force, as a result of Federal government reductions in urban support; the chief beneficiaries in the process were the corporations.

The failure of Carter (and his black élite allies) to resolve the 'pervasive and intractable crisis' of the 'American political system' produced three significant trends, all of which affected the present and future status of Afro-Americans in public life. First, as political theorists John Judis and Alan Wolfe noted, Cold-War Liberalism and the old political coalition of Roosevelt had finally collapsed. There was an 'estrangement of Americans from party politics and governmental authority, demonstrated in flagging turnout at the polls, growing independent registration at the expense of both major parties, and the distrust of politicians and government indicated in many opinion surveys and in declining voting rates'.<sup>21</sup> Centrist social

liberalism, as the political centre of US political discourse, was fractured on the left and right. Second, there was a growing and perceptible degree of alienation between the black élite, who still favoured Carter, and the majority of black workers and the poor, who were either neutral or by now completely alienated from the political process. Black labour had once believed that the elevation of a black professional into high public office could resolve its pressing economic and social problems. In the aftermath of Jackson's, Coleman Young's and other black mayors' betrayals of their own constituents, a sobering sense of disillusionment pervaded the black community. Even the black élite was shocked and angered in 1979, however, when Carter pressured UN ambassador Andrew Young to resign after he had held an informal discussion with a representative of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Finally, there was among the urban underclass, or permanent reserve army of labour, a new degree of volatility, of hopelessness and rage. This became strikingly evident in May 1980, when the residents of Liberty City, Brownsville, and Coconut Grove, the black neighbourhoods of Miami, Florida, rose up in rebellion against local authorities and police. In the most disruptive urban revolt since 1968, between \$50 to \$100 million worth of property damage occurred in several days. Sixty-seven buildings were damaged; 1250 persons were arrested; 400 persons were injured, and 18 were killed; 3600 National Guardsmen were called into Miami to restore order. When Miami officials asked members of the black élite, including Benjamin Hooks, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and Houston Congressperson G. T. Leland, to 'cool off' the black community, they were uniformly told by local black activists that they were viewed as unwelcome collaborators. Blacks in Liberty City, where unemployment among adults reached 50 per cent, 'resent[cd] the way they were called in', one black journalist noted. Hooks, Young, and others 'came because people who had ignored our warnings could not tell us they didn't know what was brewing'.<sup>22</sup> The spectre of black urban rebellion once again had made national headlines. But unlike in the mid-to-late-1960s, the backers of racial inequality and white 'mass conservatism' were infinitely stronger in 1980, and were prepared to repress the rights of all national minorities by whatever means at their disposal.

## V

For 100 years, American racists had looked back fondly upon the Ku Klux Klan's central role as the bulwark of white supremacy during 'each and every phase of Radical Reconstruction'. The reaction to the struggle for multicultural democracy in the 1970s now gave the historical opening for Klansmen to employ 'intimidation by any effective means of violence conceivable' against the grandchildren of former slaves.<sup>23</sup> Between 1971 and 1980, the Klan almost tripled its national membership. In January 1977, 250 Klansmen held a public rally in Carter's hometown, Plains, Georgia. In 1978-79, Klansmen engaged in a bloody campaign against blacks. The racists fired shotguns into the homes of several NAACP leaders in the South; on 8 May 1979, Klansmen shot one black man in the face in Carbon Hill, Alabama; the group firebombed black homes, churches and schools in over 100 towns and rural areas. One Klansman, 'Grand Dragon' Thomas Metzger, organised a fascist-oriented, black-uniformed security force in California, which led violent attacks against progressive and inter-racial groups. In 1980, Metzger's support among conservative, southern California white voters was registered in his victory in the Democratic Party primary in the state's forty-third congressional district. Metzger's programme of 'white rights' included promises to end school desegregation, affirmative action, and 'a five-year moratorium on all foreign immigration'.<sup>24</sup> The most outrageous act of Klan violence took place in Greensboro, North Carolina, on 3 November 1979. Seventy-five Klansmen and Nazis attacked an anti-racist rally, leaving five protestors killed and eleven others wounded. Only six of the murderers were tried, and an all-white jury acquitted the racists, despite television videotaped evidence which documented the killings in cold and unambiguous detail. A few black groups responded to Klan violence in the only language that racists understand. In November 1978, Klansmen and Okolona, Mississippi police co-operated in an ambush of members of the United League, a black Southern rights organisation. In the shoot-out, one Klansman was killed, and five others were seriously wounded. United League leader Skip Robinson stated later, 'Over 100 rounds [of ammunition] were fired. The Klan never said anything about it, the police never said anything about it, the press never said anything about it. But after that we never saw no more Klan in Okolona.'<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the Klan and Nazis were only a very small portion of the forces of racism which were unleashed against the black community. Police across the country descended into black neighbourhoods, applying 'excessive force' when making routine arrests, shooting first and asking questions later. During the Miami Rebellion of May 1980, a small gang of white police officers destroyed black suspects' automobiles with billy clubs, rifles and steel pipes. Automobiles were spray-painted with the words 'Looter', 'Thief', and 'I am a Cheap No Good Looter'.<sup>26</sup> In Oakland, California, police officers killed nine black males in 1979 alone, one of whom was a 15-year-old boy. One of the victims was a trade unionist, 37-year-old Charles Briscoe:

On September 5, 1979, Briscoe was gunned down by a police officer who had been involved in four other fatal shootings. First the officer emptied his shotgun into Briscoe and then finished him off with his service revolver. There were no witnesses to corroborate the officer's story that . . . he had to shoot Briscoe a second time because, after being shot with the shotgun, Briscoe walked towards his van and reached for a weapon. The coroner's report, however, indicated the shotgun blasts had broken both of Briscoe's legs; he couldn't have walked to the van. Nevertheless the district attorney and the police department found the shooting justifiable; a civilian police review board was prohibited from looking into the Briscoe case.<sup>27</sup>

In August 1980, Philadelphia police 'accidentally' killed a 17-year-old black suspect while he was being 'pistol-whipped'. In Detroit, during the summer of 1980, police officers fired on seven black suspects, critically wounding three. Detroit police routinely arrested black women on minor charges, such as speeding, and once in the station house, subjected them to humiliating strip-searches and sexual abuse. In one controversial arrest, police strip-searched and harassed three black female relatives of Detroit mayor Coleman Young. In another Detroit case, 'a young black man died after being tortured by a white officer using [an electric] cattle-prod'.<sup>28</sup> When a white policeman was killed in New Orleans on 8 November 1980, white officers assassinated four blacks in five days, in order to intimidate the black urban community. By the early 1980s, 'for every white person killed by the police' in the US in any year, '22 black

persons, are killed'.<sup>29</sup> Surveying police atrocities, Washington, DC black activist Damu Smith drew a direct correlation between police repression and mass conservatism. 'The police have very consciously begun to link up more with the racist right wing movement, organizing for the ruling class in its stepped up assault on the rights of the people', Smith suggested in 1981. 'The police today are working to protect and serve those who are in power as well as those in the right wing movement who are organizing at the behest of those in power.'<sup>30</sup>

The most prevalent form of American racist violence was lynching: hangings, castrations, shootings, and other acts of racially motivated random violence. In 1976, Mobile police harassed a young black businessman and community activist Glen Diamond (Casmara Mani). After beating him, officers 'placed a noose around his neck' and temporarily strangled him in a downtown public square.<sup>31</sup> A Cleveland, Ohio, white patent attorney shotgunned two 14-year-old black girls. Convicted of felonious assault, the attorney countersued the girls' parents and was awarded \$5000. One mother of the girls declared to the press, 'My daughter still has 12 pellets from a 16 gauge shotgun in her neck. It's like telling this man he was within his rights shooting my daughter'.<sup>32</sup> In Arizona, 300 black evangelical Christians purchased a farm to develop a religious retreat. In several months, local whites destroyed their recreation centre and swimming pool. Black members were shot at and 'almost run down by automobiles'. In October 1981, a bomb was planted in their church van which exploded, killing one and injuring eight others.<sup>33</sup> Mississippi whites were responsible for at least twelve separate lynchings of blacks in 1980. On 12 October 1981, the body of Douglas McDonald was pulled from a lake in Eastover, Mississippi: the black man's ears were removed and his sex organs had been hacked off. Black investigators 'could get no information from the mortician, the police nor the family'.<sup>34</sup> In Social Circle, Georgia, the cousin of my wife, Lynn Jackson, was discovered lynched on 8 December 1981. Several months later, Frederick York, a 38-year-old black man, was found hanging from a tree in downtown Atlanta. The two most publicised incidents of random violence against blacks occurred in Buffalo, New York, and Atlanta. In September–October 1980, one or more whites randomly selected black males in Buffalo for murder. Several blacks were executed on street corners; one was nearly choked to death as he sat in a hospital room recovering from surgery. Two black men, 71-year-old Parler W. Edwards and 40-year-old Ernest Jones, were

savagely beaten to death and amazingly, had their hearts removed from their corpses by the killer or killers. Twenty-eight black youths were methodically murdered in Atlanta between 1979–82. A black man was arrested and convicted of killing two of the youths in 1981, but the remaining murders were left unresolved. After the initial arrest, the FBI refused to pursue new evidence in the other cases.

COINTELPRO-type repression of black radicals, revolutionary nationalists and Marxists also resurfaced during these years. RNA Deputy Minister of Defense Kamau Kambui was arrested by FBI agents in Mississippi. Charged '*with signing his name incorrectly while purchasing a shotgun*', he was convicted and sentenced to a five-year prison sentence.<sup>35</sup> After the acquittal of the Nazis and Klansmen, local police arrested eight anti-racist demonstrators in Greensboro, North Carolina, charging them with 'fire-bombing, attempted fire-bombing and conspiracy to fire-bomb'. Black Marxist Nelson Johnson, who had received severe knife wounds during the 1979 attack, was charged with 'felony riot' immediately after the incident. Johnson was later jailed for 20 days on 'contempt' charges.<sup>36</sup> On 1 November 1980, black community activist Yulanda Ward was executed by four armed assailants in Washington, DC. A powerful 0.357 magnum pistol had been fired against her head, and her body was left in the streets of the city. Rodney Johnson, a black communist and San Diego labour activist, was charged with two white workers with 'conspiracy to bomb an electrical transformer' in the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company's shipyards, the largest in the US. Days before his arrest, Johnson had led the fight among black and white workers against hazardous working conditions and low wages.<sup>37</sup> In May 1982, California officials arrested a former Black Panther activist, Michael Zinzun, for statements he had made at a black protest gathering in front of a police station. Charging Zinzun with 'feloniously threatening the lives of five Pasadena, [California] police officers', the district attorney cited a 'rarely-used 110 year-old law' which made it a 'felony to threaten a government worker'. One official admitted that the obscure law was only 'rarely' applied in threats made against tax collectors and Federal marshals, but 'the gravity of Mr. Zinzun's conduct' more than justified his arrest under any possible grounds. An American Civil Liberties Union lawyer argued that Zinzun's arrest was a blatant violation of the rights of free speech covered in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. 'The implications of this kind of law are fairly obvious', Zinzun's attorney

complained. 'You can risk a felony prosecution anytime you utter words that the police don't like.'<sup>38</sup>

Even moderate black civil rights leaders were not immune to racist assaults and harassment. Vernon Jordan was shot in the back by a gunman in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on 29 May 1980. Police charged an 'avowed racist', Joseph Paul Franklin, with shooting the Urban League leader. Franklin had previously been charged with shooting two Salt Lake City, Utah, black men in August 1980, and was later sentenced to two life imprisonment terms in the case. During the Jordan trial, one prisoner familiar with Franklin testified that the white racist 'talked of the shooting and identified Jordan by name'. Another witness stated under oath that Franklin came into his Ft. Wayne grocery store and graphically detailed his shooting of Jordan: 'It was about perfect. If it had been a little different it would have gotten him just right.' Franklin himself told the jury that he 'hate[d] the [black] race as a whole'. But on 17 August 1982, an all-white jury declared that Franklin was innocent in Jordan's shooting.<sup>39</sup> Traveling to Anderson, Indiana, on 20 November 1981, Benjamin Hooks discovered a burning cross – the historic symbol of the Ku Klux Klan – at the entrance of a public hall where the NAACP leader was scheduled to lecture. No persons were arrested by police. The incidents of violence, an almost endless list of brutalities which touched the lives of millions of blacks, appeared to many to constitute a pattern of black genocide. 'There is almost a hysteria in black communities because of the belief that there is a [racist] conspiracy', Jesse Jackson stated in November 1980. 'Racism has become fashionable again and feelings of guilt toward blacks have turned to feelings of hostility. This country has taken a definite swing toward fascism.' Former King aide Hosea Williams charged that the Carter Administration was indirectly responsible for 'the mounting KKK's violent activities against blacks all across the country'.<sup>40</sup> Carter's response to the outraged demands of blacks and the democratic left that he should conduct vigorous federal measures against black genocide paralleled his other initiatives on welfare, guaranteed employment for the poor, and public housing – virtually nothing. After all, the blacks had been given too much in previous years.

## VI

The rising tide of modern white supremacy on America's streets was

also manifested within the nation's high court and political institutions. During Nixon's term in office, several liberal Supreme Court Justices retired. Chief Justice Warren was replaced by a Minnesota Republican, Warren Burger; other doctrinaire conservatives were later appointed. As a result, throughout the 1970s the Supreme Court's decisions reflected an increasingly conservative and anti-black bias. By a narrow five to four margin, the Court ruled against Brian F. Weber, a white steelworker who sued the Steelworkers Union and the Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corporation in Gramercy, Louisiana, to halt the company's affirmative action programme for blacks. But in 1978, the Court overturned the affirmative action programme of the University of California-Davis Law School in the *Bakke* decision. After *Bakke*, the number of blacks recruited and admitted to many professional schools dropped sharply. As political economist Michael Reich observed, 'many whites apparently felt that affirmative action programs had taken away educational opportunities, jobs, and income away from white families . . . and had given these advantages to undeserving blacks who had not worked for them. The publicity given to the Bakke Supreme Court case provided a highly distorted picture of undeserved black gains' to many whites, leading 'to charges of "racism in reverse"'.<sup>41</sup> The logic of *Bakke* was applied to electoral politics as well. In 1980, the Court upheld an electoral arrangement which diluted the voting strength of blacks, the *City of Mobile vs. Bolden*. Potter Stewart, Associate Justice and an Eisenhower appointee, argued that the Fifteenth Amendment did not include the 'right to have black candidates elected'. Political scientists Twiley W. Barker, Jr., and Lucius J. Barker noted that the decision 'in effect' validated 'electoral arrangements that have a discriminatory impact where the more stringent requirement of intentional or purposeful discrimination cannot be established. . . . It appears that the Court will be satisfied as long as the scheme does not abridge or deny the blacks the right to vote.'<sup>42</sup>

Against this background of political retreat and racist reaction, of social malaise and economic disorder, Ronald Reagan rose to public prominence. As discussed briefly in Chapter 5, Reagan had earned his credentials on the far-right during the 1960s as governor of California. In 1976 he had challenged the Republican incumbent, Gerald Ford, for their party's presidential nomination, and was only narrowly defeated. For over a decade, Reagan was the darling of mass



conservatism. So much was his 1980 candidacy for the White House identified with the various movements against affirmative action, court-ordered busing, and civil rights for blacks, Latinos, women and others that the entire reactionary political phenomenon was termed 'Reaganism'. Reaganites observed that US military spending had declined from 8.0 per cent of the gross national product (GNP) in 1965–70 to 4.6 per cent of the GNP during the Ford and Carter Administrations. Social spending for food stamps, unemployment compensation, Social Security and other social democratic-type reforms during the same period had increased from 5.1 per cent of the GNP to 8.6 per cent. Thus, Reaganites blamed non-productive Federal expenditures as the root cause of inflation, and charged the Democrats and liberal Republican opponents with being 'weak on defense' and accommodationist towards the Soviets. Business profits, adjusted for inflation, had grown a meagre 3.4 per cent in ten years: therefore, conservatives sought to give massive tax reductions to the corporations, waiving certain environmental protection laws, at the expense of working-class and non-white Americans. The 'ideological glue' of Reaganism was racism. The 69-year-old conservative made this clear in August 1980, at a speech delivered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Before a cheering white crowd, Reagan pledged that his administration would defend the principle of 'states' rights'.<sup>43</sup> Given that the town was the site of the brutal murders of three desegregation workers in 1964, and that the phrase itself was equated by many Southern whites to mean 'white supremacy', the gravity of Reagan's speech could not be lost upon most blacks. Despite Reagan's overtly racist stance, he was able to attract a small number of black intellectuals and former civil rights leaders to his campaign. Dr Nathan Wright, convenor of the 1968 Black Power conference, announced his support for the Republican. Other 'Black Reaganites' included Thomas Sowell, a Marxist-turned-conservative who served as a fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, California; economist Walter E. Williams of George Mason University; Republican leader J. A. Y. Parker; and Wendell Wilkie Gunn, assistant treasurer of the Pepsi Cola corporation. The two most influential black converts were King's closest aide, Ralph David Abernathy, and SCLC activist Hosea Williams. Abernathy justified his endorsement of one of King's bitterest opponents by attacking the dismal record of the Carter Administration on economic and civil rights issues.

Most black leaders were positively frightened by Reagan's conser-

vative economic rhetoric and covert appeals to racism, and were especially outraged with Abernathy's actions. Mrs King declared that Reaganism represented the most 'negative' and 'even irrational elements in our society'. One black newspaper called Abernathy a 'modern Judas', a 'senile' turncoat who had forgotten 'the police dogs, Selmas, Birmingham, the marches, the sit-ins, the kneel-ins, the pray-ins, Bull Connor, the jails, the beatings, the bombings and the humiliation. . . .'<sup>44</sup> Historically, Reagan was the first national candidate from the mass conservative tendency of American politics to be nominated since Barry Goldwater, in 1964. This fact alone made the record of Carter seem remarkably enlightened. The overwhelming majority of black élite political organisations, from the NAACP to local civil rights groups, vigorously worked for Carter's re-election. But the black poor and the working class, in spite of their genuine revulsion against Reaganism, could not be mobilised sufficiently to accept a candidate who had done so little to protect, much less expand upon, the legislative gains of the Second Reconstruction. In November 1980, Reagan received 43.3 million popular votes and 489 electoral votes, to Carter's 35 million popular votes and 49 electoral votes. A liberal Republican, Illinois Representative John Anderson, ran an independent race and captured 7 per cent of the popular vote in the general election. Between 85 to 91 per cent of the blacks voted for Carter, a percentage slightly below his 1976 black voter figure. Of 17 million black adults who were eligible to vote in 1980, only 7 million or 40 per cent actually voted. The slippage in black votes for Carter allowed Reagan to carry several closely contested Southern states. Furthermore, most of the other New Deal electoral coalition constituencies had been badly divided. A majority of white trade unionists did not vote for Carter; most of the Jewish vote was split between Anderson and Reagan; and only 54 per cent of Puerto Rican and Mexican-American voters supported Carter. Conservative Republicans captured control of the US Senate for the first time in a quarter-century. Carter was sent back to Plains, Georgia, as blacks and the democratic left pondered with some anxiety what the new administration would mean.

With the rapid legislative manoeuvres reminiscent of Roosevelt's 'Hundred Days' period of 1933, when the nation was faced with the Great Depression, the Reagan Administration sought to construct a conservative and unequal order. Within months, Reagan illustrated that his government, unlike Nixon's, would not tolerate even the

slightest concessions to the poor, the dispossessed, racial minorities, and labour. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), founded in 1970 under Nixon, was a modest Federal government initiative which attempted to improve workplace conditions, especially for labourers in industries with a record of dangerous and environmentally unsafe conditions. Reagan named a millionaire construction owner, Thorne Auchter, as OSHA director, and a former CIA employee as Auchter's chief assistant. Heading the administration's Task Force to eliminate federal regulations on corporations was J. C. Miller III, a former academic fellow at a right-wing research centre, who had once 'testified in opposition to the proposed OSHA coke-oven standard intended to limit exposure of coke-oven workers to deadly cancer-causing fumes'. Before Congress, Miller had 'argued that the benefits of protecting coke-oven workers were not worth the cost'.<sup>45</sup> Included within Reagan's broad assault upon the legacy of social centrist liberalism were numerous proposals: the abandonment of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act programme, funded in 1981 for \$3.1 billion, and the elimination of its 150,000 federally funded jobs; the closing of the National Consumer Co-operative Bank, which granted loans to small economic co-operatives; a \$2 billion reduction in the federal Food Stamps Program by fiscal 1983; the elimination of the \$2 billion Guaranteed Student Loan Program; the reduction of \$1.7 billion from child nutrition programmes sponsored by the Federal government by fiscal 1983; the closing of the Neighborhood Self Help and Planning Assistance Programs, which allotted \$55 million in fiscal 1981 to aid inner cities. To bolster economic growth and corporate profits, Reagan ordered the severe reduction in federal enforcement of affirmative action regulations. Under Carter, employers with federal contracts had to submit written affirmative action plans if they had at least 50 employees and had a contract at \$50,000 or above. Reagan proposed submission of plans 'only for contractors with 250 or more workers and a government contract worth \$1 million'. Reagan also reduced 'both eligibility and levels of support' for poor women to receive food stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children payments. By August 1981, Congress had ratified most of these proposals, and began to contemplate even more stringent restrictions in the areas of human needs. The New York-based Popular Economic Research Group declared: 'While the nation's leading homemaker – Nancy Reagan – spent over \$200,000 to replace the White House

china, thousands of other mothers began to wonder not what they would serve dinner on, but whether they would serve it at all. . . . Women and people of color are being forced to bear the burden of Reagan's misguided and destructive economics.'<sup>46</sup>

In the areas of defence foreign policy, Reaganism articulated a vision of white capitalist world supremacy. The president proposed the largest military expenditures in human history, \$1.6 trillion over a five-year period. This inconceivable amount came to almost \$11,000 for every US citizen who paid taxes on 1979 income. Abandoning the previous administration's public commitment to human rights, Reagan's State Department forged closer relationships with fascist military juntas and racist regimes. During 1982, as black miners and workers staged a series of strikes in South Africa, Reagan authorised the opening of new honorary consulates in three US cities, Seattle, Denver, and Cleveland, for the *apartheid* regime. Reagan asked Congress for \$2.3 million to train black South Africans inside South Africa, thereby reinforcing the separate-and-unequal educational system. Export control regulations on such critical items as air ambulances, computers and helicopters were weakened to provide greater support for *apartheid*. The dispatch with which conservative and most centrist politicians passed Reagan's authoritarian military programme was described by an outraged US Representative Dellums in a May 1982 interview:

Two weeks ago, in the midst of all these polls about people being concerned about the military budget, my colleagues, in four hours and 40 minutes, with time off for lunch in the middle, passed a \$255.1 billion military budget. Now, you tell me anybody can intelligently debate a quarter of a trillion-dollar budget in four hours and 40 minutes? The vote was 40 to 3. . . . Do you think, on a ratio of 40 to 3 . . . that the American people want to spend a quarter of a trillion dollars on the military budget? But that's how far away my colleagues are from the American people. Maybe we've arrived at a point where this system does not serve us well. I don't see anything sacrosanct about the two-party system.<sup>47</sup>

The impact of Reaganism was felt across the black community as a series of devastating shocks. The Office of Federal Contracts Compliance Programs, one of the Federal government's desegregation agencies, was ordered to reduce its enforcement activities. Under

Reagan, the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department filed only 5 lawsuits on racial discrimination issues in its first six months, compared to 17 suits under Carter and 24 suits under Nixon during their first six months' tenure. On 4 September 1981, the US Department of Agriculture reduced the amount of food served to 26 million children in over 94,000 schools across the nation. Dietary allowances were distorted in order to reduce federal expenditures for children's lunches. For three weeks, before they were forced to retract, Reagan's nutrition experts even classified catsup and pickle relish as 'vegetables'. On 1 October 1981, more than 400,000 poor families were removed from federal and state welfare rolls. In one year, Reagan had succeeded where Nixon had failed: he actually expanded poverty in America. Between 1969 and 1974, the total number of black families below the poverty line rose from 1.3 million to 1.5 million. Poor white families in these years actually declined slightly, from 3.6 million to 3.5 million; the total number of persons below the poverty line remained roughly the same for the period, 24.1 million in 1969, 24.2 million in 1974. In Reagan's first year in office, the real median income of all black families declined by 5.2 per cent compared to the 1980 figure. The number of poor Americans increased by 2.2 million in 1981, and the share of black families below the poverty line moved upward from 32.4 per cent to 34.2 per cent. In a single year, 'much of the progress that had been made against poverty in the 1960s and 1970s' had been 'wiped out', according to the *New York Times*.<sup>48</sup> In August 1982, Dr James D. McGhee, the Urban League's Director of Research, warned that Reaganomics had blunted 'the hopes and [dashed] the dreams of millions of the poor', and had seriously threatened 'the existence of an emerging, still fragile black middle-class as well. . . . Programs that accomplished so much are now being eliminated one after another for seemingly ideological rather than budgetary reasons, and America is defaulting on its commitment to assure equal opportunity for all its citizens.'<sup>49</sup> Even Reagan's Federal tax cut, passed by Congress in August 1981, to stimulate consumer savings, was designed to perpetuate racial inequality. The average white household was scheduled to receive \$1019 in tax cuts for 1983, and \$1369 in 1984, while the average black household would receive only \$542 in 1983 and \$632 in 1984.

In a sense, the triumph of Reaganism represented a cruel and paradoxical conclusion to part of the rebellious impulse of the late 1960s. No-one expressed this better than Eldridge Cleaver. After

returning to the US in 1974, Cleaver was incarcerated for less than a year in jail. By the early 1980s, Cleaver had not only repudiated his old Black Panther ties, but actually had joined forces with racist mass conservatism. In a February 1982 interview, Cleaver declared:

. . . God came to France and tapped me on my shoulder and said, ‘Eldridge, follow me. . . .’ [Americans] don’t believe or even manifest any awareness of what makes our democratic form of government different from other forms of government. They don’t understand and appreciate the great battles and triumphs and victories that were involved in creating this country. We are still the most free and the most democratic country in the world. I think America is the greatest country in the world. I really feel in my heart that America really needs to take control of the world. . . . Black people are notorious for sitting on the sidelines complaining, but they won’t get off their butt and go vote and so they are taking no responsibility for what happens except they have full responsibility for not doing anything to make it happen differently. I believe that instead of black people hating the police department, I think they need to join the police department . . . and make it our own.

In Cleaver’s ‘most democratic country in the world’, 23.4 million Americans, or about one out of every five workers, were unemployed in 1981. Of all black workers 30.5 per cent were jobless at some point during the year. In June 1982, Congress voted to cut federal welfare programmes by one-fifth and Medicaid spending by one-sixth, and reduced other domestic programmes, including assistance to state and municipal governments, by a projected \$45 billion by 1985. Congress’ budgetary actions were aimed specifically to cripple blacks, Hispanics, low-income workers, and the unemployed. The 1982 budget ‘goes to the people who were bloodied last year and bloodies them and guts them some more’, declared black Congressman Parren Mitchell.<sup>51</sup> Reaganism, racism, and political reaction had made a mockery of democracy.